

Asian American Press

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Remembering victims of the Cambodian genocide

WASHINGTON, D.C. — On December 15, 2005, Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-04) submitted the following statement in the Congressional Record on the passage of a resolution remembering the victims of the Cambodian genocide (H.Con. Res. 238).

"I am very proud to represent in the U.S. Congress thousands of refugees, including many from Cambodia, who now call Minnesota their home. The Cambodian refugee story is one of overcoming tragedy and violence, but it is also one of courage and resiliency. Over thirty years ago, Pol Pot led the Communist guerilla group, the Khmer Rouge, in a large-scale insurgency to restructure Khmer society. In four short years, close to 2 million Cambodians, over a quarter of the population, perished in one of the worst atrocities in modern history.

"In response to this terrible tragedy, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, landmark legislation that formally incorporated into U.S. law the international definition of a

refugee and formalized the process of refugee resettlement. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Refugee Act which paved the way for 150,000 Cambodians to resettle in the United States.

"Minnesota has a long and proud tradition of being a safe haven for refugees. The Minnesota-based American Refugee Committee was founded to assist the victims of the Cambodian crisis. With their help, many Cambodian families have made new lives for themselves here in Minnesota and are now enriching our community as business owners, community leaders, professionals, and scholars.

"One remarkable example is the story of my constituents Kunrath and Kevin Lam, both survivors of the Killing Fields and the owners of Cheng Heng Restaurant in St. Paul. Kunrath's father (Bunthang Van), was targeted by the Khmer Rouge for being an urban intellectual. Though her father escaped, 200 of her family members, including Kunrath's baby brother, all perished in the genocide.

"Despite her tremendous loss,

Kunrath Lam came to Minnesota filled with promise and hope. She and her husband own a thriving business and remain active within their community. Four years ago, they began pooling tips and donations from their faithful customers. Now, a new school stands in the childhood village of Kunrath's father in northwest Cambodia, a country that once banned schools. Over 800 students attend classes at the Sara Elementary School, named after their daughter, and the Lams are now raising money to build another school in a nearby village.

"The Lams' story is one of many refugee stories filled with courage and hope. I am proud to cosponsor this

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Bunthang Van, a survivor of the Cambodian genocide in the 1970s, and his granddaughter Sarah Lam, 6. A school is now named for her Van's boyhood home in Cambodia.

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resolution remembering the victims of the Cambodian genocide and welcoming the establishment of an international criminal tribunal to bring to justice the perpetrators of the genocide. This resolution represents a small but important step in remembering the victims and honoring the survivors of Cambodia's Killing Fields."

The school that was built by the Lam's is in the small village of Maung District in Cambodia's Northeast Battambang Province.

For the past eight years the Lam's have enjoyed the success of their Cheng Heng Restaurant that is now one of the most popular Asian restaurants at 448 University Avenue in St. Paul. Their success has led to two building expansions, outward and upward. They have also recently purchased the Drover's Hotel on I-494 and Concord in South St. Paul, and celebrate its grand opening this week after extensive and ongoing renovations.

They also have two healthy and happy young children, Sarah Lam, 6, and her little brother Vincent Lam, 2.

Kevin Lam was inspired with the visit of a Buddhist Monk from California, who told of the people of the impoverished Battambang Province in Cambodia. The village he spoke of was the birthplace of Kunrath's father, Bunthang Van.

Kevin decided then that he would help raise the money for a primary school. It is nothing fancy, but it would serve as the only permanent building in the village, as a school and community center. It will also be named for their daughter Sarah.

"We have been blessed in this country and have luck and I can't forget the suffering of the Cambodians, and have to look back. Every little bit counts."

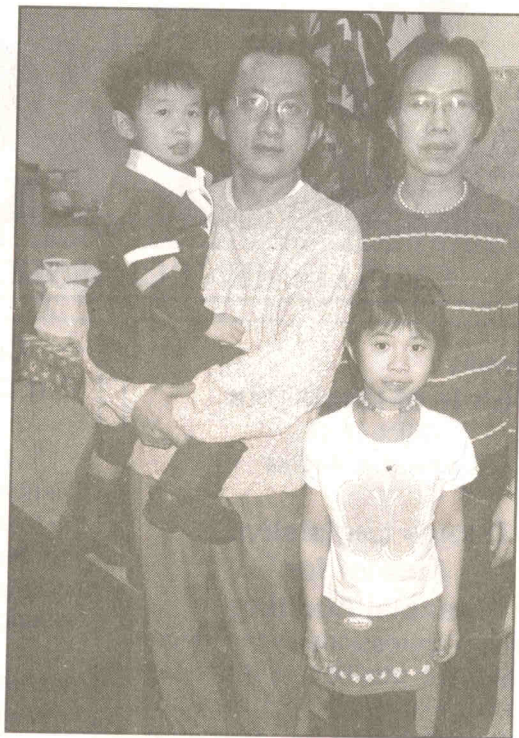
Construction began in January and the local builders send videotapes of the structure going up right next to the original school that has fallen into disrepair. Villagers appear onscreen to thank the Lam's for what they are doing for their

community.

The school costs are \$17,000 to build. The Lam's donated much of the funds themselves and another \$1,700 came from friends over the past year. A little came from Mark Gason, Joel Harper, Dan Schultz, and other regular customers that donated dollars with their frequent restaurant visit.

"We really appreciate their help, along with lot of Hmong and non Asian customers too," said Kunrath. "I used all of my tip money toward the school."

They will continue to raise funds pay for desks, school supplies and about \$50 per month for a fulltime teacher until the government decides to send their own



Kevin and Kunrath Lam, and their children Sarah, 6, and Vincent, 2. The family began running a jewelry shop, then the successful Cheng Heng Restaurant, and are now going into the hotel business. They also built a school in Cambodia.

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instructor. The Lam's also regularly send old clothes and money to buy rice.

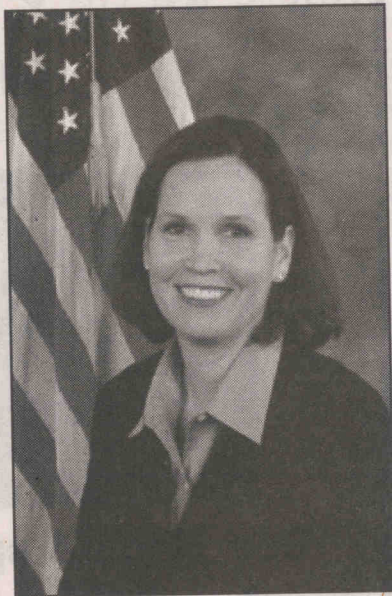
Kevin believes simply that to build the school and provide access to education and opportunity in the future for other Cambodians, will help to elevate him in the next life.

For Bunthang Van, life in Cambodia and America has been rough. He escaped his Maung district village with the onset of Pol Pot's regime and now knows that many of the people he grew up did not survive the killing fields, especially the schoolteachers and leaders.

Van started a jewelry store in St. Paul and is lucky to have survived a violent robbery in the 1990s. Today, he continues to run the jewelry store at Cheng Heng with his spouse, Chhenglay Meas. He also works for democracy and justice in his native Cambodia, by supporting the peaceful efforts of his colleagues around the world to help his former homeland out of poverty and out of a dictatorship.

"We want our grandchildren to learn Cambodian, and we want to teach our young to have a kind heart, and to understand and appreciate others."

The building was completed late this summer. The family would like to be present for the inauguration. Van feels the children are too young at present to go to Cambodia and truly appreciate what is taking



Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-04) submitted a statement in the Congressional Record on the passage of a resolution remembering the victims of the Cambodian genocide (H.Con.Res. 238). The statement mentioned Minnesota Cambodians who are survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide. McCollum also calls for a U.S. effort to remove unexploded ordnance from Southeast Asian nations as a result of U.S. bombing during the Vietnam War, and continues to kill hundreds of people a year.

place, even if the school is being named after Sarah. He would like them to visit when they are a little older.